EGL 33 W: Risk and Reward

One can give nothing whatever without giving oneself -- that is to say, risking oneself.

-- James Baldwin

Required Texts:


The Poet’s Companion: A Guide to the Pleasures of Writing Poetry – Kim Addonizio, Dorianne Laux

A note about these chosen texts:

Writing Fiction is a book I’ve used in teaching many of my creative writing classes. It’s a fairly exhaustive manual that covers the rudimentary craft aspects of writing fiction. It should be mentioned that a good many of these pieces of advice may be applied to other genres of writing, such as non-fiction, playwriting, and poetry. In short, the book encourages the writer to be more present in the world, to push oneself toward that place which might otherwise not be recognized in the work. It seems a perfect companion to our goal of exploration and discovery in our writing, that which uncovers toward that previously hidden parts of ourselves that may well have percolated in the work but not yet been wholly realized. Here we have the building blocks that are necessary to the creation of such work. We will be doing exercises from the book (along with my own assigned exercises), talking about the assortment of craft elements and applying them to our own work.

The Poet’s Companion is just that, something to accompany you in your poetic endeavors. Please keep in mind that this book and the readings we will be doing from the text, can be applied to all aspects of writing, much like Writing Fiction. In short, the book will be used as a launch-pad for your creative work, as a means to get you to places in your writing you may well not have arrived at otherwise. The readings and exercises therein as assigned are also designed to take you to brave places, new and uncharted territory.

Supplemental Reading:

Some weeks I’ll give you some additional poems, essays, or websites to look at regarding the topic at hand. These readings are meant to compliment that week’s reading, and discussion questions will be offered to enhance your reading of the material.

Weekly Writing Assignments:
Each week, there will be several short (500 words or less) writing exercises based in some way upon the week’s topic. You will be asked to take on one of these writing exercises, with the hope that it might steer you toward material that surprises you and takes you to a place you might not have expected to go. Please keep in mind these exercises are not meant to generate finished work (i.e. a complete story), but to used as explorations and beginning points. It’s my hope that these exercises will prompt you to go further, and that you might well continue with the work after you have started it. As well, these exercises could well end up being one of the pieces you submit for the workshop, something that begs expansion and that you feel excited about. What’s important is that you feel inspired by the work, that you take on these exercises that end up pushing you toward surprising places.

Your responses to the exercises will be posted in the forum by Thursday afternoon, so your classmates will have the opportunity to read and offer comments on them (I’ll post feedback as well). Although your comments on these exercises won’t necessarily be as in-depth as your comments on the full-length pieces we’ll be workshopping in the second half of the quarter, it’s critical that we all become comfortable with reading and discussing one another’s work, and I’ll be giving explicit instructions on what you should be looking for each week.

*Please note that once we begin workshop in the second part of the term, all writing exercises are entirely optional.*

**The Workshop:**

At the end of week five, each student will turn in a full-length piece of writing, as we begin workshop. This piece may be a short story, a non-fiction essay, a play, or a poem. Over the course of the next five weeks the entire class will read and offer in-depth, detailed comments on them. Ideally, this piece will be an extension and expansion of one of your early exercise responses, but it doesn’t have to be.

*Please note: the short story, non-fiction essay, or play can be 2000-5000 words; the poem may be any length.*

Responses and suggestion in the workshop will be aimed at helping the author explore her/his work and getting aid in getting a manuscript to the NEXT step of development. Revision will be seen as an on-going process of exploration. We will discuss stories always remembering to look at the larger intent of the work, pointing to elements of craft and how the writer might best use the tools discussed in the readings, where it is we can see the piece heading. The work will be examined for the balance of craft that makes it a successful portrayal of the author’s vision inside that particular world, how this draft could be developed to the next point in the creative process.

What’s most important, that we feel safe in exploring those areas that open up these areas in our own creative development, and we will establish guidelines in helping us achieve such a goal. This class is indeed all about risk, and in order to do as much of this type of work we’ll be sure to create an environment that makes as much possible.
In the last five weeks of class you will also be asked to submit a second piece of writing, in a different genre (500-2000 words; no minimum length requirements for poetry) than the one previously turned in. So then, if you turned in a story for your first workshop discussion, you could turn in a non-fiction essay, or play, or poem. The work is not expected to be a full-length work, the best way to think of it would be as a work-in-progress, something not in the genre you might typically write in. This piece will be discussed in less detail (a paragraph or two in the way of feedback) to be turned in to the forum no later than Week Nine of instruction.

**Chat:**

Near the end of each week, I will host an hour-long “chat” session. This session is an online “office hour” of sorts, but in a group context. Attendance is optional, and the session will be recorded if you can’t make it. This is where I’ll address your issues of craft and process, talk about these readings covered and how we might apply them to our own material. We’ll discuss the exercises, questions that might have come up for you this past week as related to the readings and your own work, continue the conversations regarding student work posted in the forum. In the second half of the quarter, chat will continue our discussions of the work-shopped student pieces. My greatest hope is that we all can nurture one another’s work here and gently push each other further. As well, that we can simulate the traditional classroom environment, all of us contributing to the conversation and coming up with answers and inspiration in a true dialogue which inspires.

**Your Weekly Responsibilities:**

Log onto the blackboard, and read through the entire “Schedule” page. This page included my “lecture” for the week, as well as assignments, supplemental readings and links, and other reminders.

Read the assigned texts, and post your responses to the discussion section in the forum.

Weeks 1-5: Respond to ONE of the Writing Exercises, post your response in the forum, and read/comment on one other student piece as described below.

Weeks 6-10: Provide in-depth (roughly a page) of comments for each full-length student piece submitted in the forum, checking back later in the week to continue your involvement in the conversation,

One full-length fiction piece OR non-fiction piece OR drama piece OR poem. (*The short story, non-fiction essay, or play can be 2000-5000 words, the poem may be any length*).

One shorter piece (500-2000 words; no minimum length requirements for poetry) in another genre. Again, this piece can be thought of as a work-in-progress, a shorter work not in the genre you typically work in.
Provide a paragraph (or two) of feedback on the second genre piece turned in. Participate in an hour-long “chat” session, hosted by me (optional).

What I’ll be Doing:

Sending out a weekly email containing general class information and the upcoming reading and writing assignments.

Setting up the forums and moderating the discussion within. I will generally check in at least once every weekday, although I don’t generally post on weekends.

Reading and commenting on all student work in a positive and helpful manner, keeping in mind the goals of this class, to push ourselves toward risk in our creative work. For short exercises, my responses will be a couple of paragraphs long, with perhaps a few lines of technical advice. For the full length pieces, I’ll provide a page or so of comments, plus some line by line suggestions on the attached word document.

Hosting the weekly online “chat” sessions.

Please note (a few words about real life and the class):

What’s most important is that you provide comments for the full-length pieces. Otherwise, you may think of all of the above as essentially optional. We’re all in this together, and it’s my hope that we can utilize these readings and discussions and that our feedback can help create the ultimate class experience. That said, I will completely understand if you cannot complete every assignment, that the on-line course can be easily disrupted by real life situations. Illness, professional obligations, family, can make for difficulty in fulfilling all these course responsibilities. So then, rather than adopting an uncompromising approach to your participation in this course, I recommend simply doing what you can, as you can. If there are a couple weeks in which you don’t get to the reading, not to worry. If you have to skip the exercise section for a week, it’s okay. As long as you hand in both a full-length piece and a shorter piece outside your genre, and participate fully in the workshop of the full-length piece, you’ll be fine. And let me state here, if you DO have to take a few weeks away from class, you can always come back. Again, real life is a part of the proceedings here, as I’m more than aware. After all, it’s what most of us are writing about, I want to be more than clear I take these distractions and responsibilities outside the on-line classroom into account.

Grading:

For those of you who are taking this course for a grade, the breakdown is as follows. Please note that you can change your grading status at any point before the final class meeting (Friday of the last week of class) by contacting the Stanford Continuing Studies Department).
Writing Exercises (Weeks 1-5): 20%
Full-length piece: 30%
Shorter work in different genre: 10%
Forum/Workshop Participation: 40%

Syllabus:

Week 1: A Safe Place (10/1 – 10/5)
Whatever Works, the Writing Process, pp. 1-20, Writing Fiction
A Question of Class by Dorothy Allison
Writing and Knowing, pp. 19-29, The Poet’s Companion
Journal exercise

Week 2: The Bat Cave: Showing and Telling (10/8 – 10/12)
Showing and Telling, pp. 21-71, Writing Fiction
Big Me, by Dan Chaon (included in chapter)
The Family: Inspiration and Obstacle, pp. 30-38, The Poet’s Companion
Description Exercise

Week 3: Dialogue is What We Do to Each Other (10/15 – 10/19)
Building Character, pp. 73-100 and pp. 114-115, Writing Fiction
Fiesta by Junot Diaz (included in chapter)
The Shadow, pp. 56-73, The Poet’s Companion
Scene from The Glass Menagerie by Tennessee Williams
Dialogue Exercise

Week 4: Au contraire! Just When You Thought You Knew; Surprise is All (10/22-10/26)
The Flesh Made Word, Characterization, Part II, pp. 116 – 138, Writing Fiction
Bullet in the Brain (included in chapter) by Tobias Wolff
Witnessing (pp. 64-73) from The Poet’s Companion
What Does My Character WANT? Exercise

Week 5: You Can Take the Boy/Girl Out of Kansas But You Can’t Take the Kansas Out of the Boy/Girl: The Poetry of Place (10/29 – 11/02)
Fictional Place, pp. 164-180, Writing Fiction
Westbury Court by Edwidge Dandicat
Poetry of Place, pp. 74-81, from The Poet’s Companion
Place Writing Assignment
Week 6: Somewhere in Time, How We Write About the Past and Present and Now (11/5-11/9):

OPTIONAL Time Exercise Workshop Begins!

Week 7: The Shape of Things, It Begins to Come Together (11/12-11/16):

The Tower and the Net, Story Form, Plot and Structure, pp. 247- 265, Writing Fiction Everything That Rises Must Converge (included in chapter) by Flannery O’Connor Optional Multi-genre exercise Workshop continues!

Week Eight: The Ghost in You: Point of View, How to Tell the Freakin’ Story (11/26-11/30):

Call Me Ishmael, Point of View, pp. 300-316, Writing Fiction What You Pawn I Shall Redeem (included in previous chapter) by Sherman Alexie Voice and Style, pp. 115-128, The Poet’s Companion Optional Voice Exercise Workshop continues!

Week Nine: Revise, Revise, Revise (Drat!) (12/3-12/7):

Play It Again, Sam: Revision, pp. 340-396, Writing Fiction Workshop continues! Second Genre piece due. Optional Revision Exercise

Week Ten: You Made It, Some New Discoveries, Some New Friends, Risk and Reward Realized! (12/10-12/14):

First Thanksgiving by Sharon Olds Revere Me, pp. 253-254, The Poet’s Companion Optional Writing Exercise Workshop (as necessary)